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DOI:

[10.1215/00104124-3327492](https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-3327492)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Mucignat, R. (2015). Characters in Time: Staël, P.B. Shelley, Leopardi and the Construction of Italianness in Romantic Historicism. *Comparative Literature*, 67(4), 375-393. [10.1215/00104124-3327492](https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-3327492)

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Characters in Time: Staël, Shelley, Leopardi, and the Construction of Italianness in Romantic Historicism.

Vergleiche dich! Erkenne, was du bist!
(Compare yourself! Recognize what you are!)

—Goethe, *Tasso*

IN NOVEMBER 2011, the euro-zone was at the height of the debt crisis and speculation was growing that Italy would be the next to need a financial bailout. When Mario Monti stepped in as Prime Minister in an effort to restore market trust, news media around the world were quick to view him as “the Anti-Berlusconi” who would save Italy from ruin. Evaluations of Monti, however, often took the form of backhanded compliments. The Italian daily *La Repubblica*, for instance, praised Monti for his “Anglo-Saxon” qualities—“aplomb, style, composure”—which presumably held in check notorious “national vices” (Rampini). Similarly, *Time* magazine reported that Monti’s sobriety and commitment to hard work were qualities “opposed to traditional ‘Italian’ virtues” (Faris). This talk of virtues and vices recalls an earlier discourse of national character that originated in the nineteenth century at a moment when Italians, along with other groups aspiring to nationhood, had to prove their capacity for liberty and self-rule.

I suggest, however, that the nineteenth-century discourse dealing with the Italian character goes much further than the reiteration of stereotypical images (see Beller and Leerssen). Romantic representations of Italians were imbued with, and helped shape, a new type of historical consciousness that characterizes nineteenth-century thought and concepts of national identity. This essay examines how Italians are depicted in Staël’s *Corinne, ou l’Italie* (*Corinne or Italy*, 1807) (the classical reference point for Romantic representations of Italy and national characters), Shelley’s “Lines written among the Euganean Hills” (1818), and Leopardi’s “La ginestra” (“The Broom,” 1836) in order to consider how ideas of national character changed in post-revolutionary Europe. My argument is that national typing

1 based on immutable factors such as climate and physiology was reformulated in a
 2 way that foregrounded history and human agency. Italy in particular provided a
 3 paradigm for reconceptualizing national identity *tout court*, and, in the case of
 4 Staël, Shelley, and Leopardi, understanding that the moral temperament of a peo-
 5 ple affects the outcome of political transformations. Despite conspicuous differ-
 6 ences, their texts share a preoccupation with the character of Italians considered
 7 both comparatively, that is, in relation to other nations, and diachronically, in a
 8 trajectory from classical antiquity to the present and a hypothetical future. Public
 9 morality is a key theme in nineteenth-century political thought, and all three
 10 works address, more or less explicitly, the politics of Italy's struggle for unification
 11 and independence, as well as the need to reform the allegedly degenerate charac-
 12 ter of Italians (see Patriarca). Even so, these texts are not concerned only with
 13 Italy: the Italian character, with its good and (to a greater extent) bad qualities, is
 14 taken as exemplary of the transformations of the human spirit, and Italian history
 15 as an illustration of the forces governing human history at large. In the eyes of
 16 writers such as Staël, Shelley, and Leopardi, Italians occupy a paradoxical posi-
 17 tion: on the one hand, they had founded a type of exemplary republicanism, sus-
 18 tained by revived ideals of civic virtue that were applicable not only to Italy, but
 19 also to all of Europe after the Napoleonic wars;¹ on the other hand, their backslid-
 20 ing from earlier greatness made the Italians an equally powerful memento of
 21 moral corruption and decadence. The key to understanding this dialectic lies in
 22 unravelling two discourses that mingle in Romantic ideas of Italy: history and
 23 national character.

24 It is well documented that the dynamic view of history that replaced cyclic or
 25 static models of time in the late eighteenth century regarded "human culture,
 26 morality and reason as . . . relative, changing and particular" rather than absolute
 27 and universal (Beiser 1; cf. Meinecke, Benjamin, Foucault, and Koselieck). Enlight-
 28 enment ideas about the uniformity of human nature were called into question by
 29 a new notion of character in which the discourse of Italianness acquired a particu-
 30 lar centrality. As early as 1748, David Hume had argued in the essay "Of National
 31 Characters" that "the manners of a people change very considerably from one age
 32 to another," adducing the fact that "candour, bravery, and love of liberty formed
 33 the character of the ancient Romans; as subtility, cowardice, and a slavish disposi-
 34 tion do that of the modern" (118). In his study of national character in French and
 35 British political theory, Roberto Romani (63–121) has traced the process by which
 36 climatological theories dating back to antiquity and revived by Montesquieu were
 37 reformulated in a historical spirit, foregrounding the impact of forms of govern-
 38 ment, the state of the economy, and stages of social progress. Climatological theo-
 39 ries, already under attack from the social environmentalism of Hume and the
 40 Scottish Enlightenment, were discarded after the French Revolution, when the
 41 excesses of the Terror, Napoleon's rise to power, and the backlash against liberal

42
 43 ¹ It should be noted that this idealized picture of medieval and Renaissance Republics has largely
 44 been debunked by modern scholarship. The notion of civic humanism, first proposed by Baron in
 45 1928, has been questioned by Siegel and Jones, among others, in studies that foreground the rhe-
 46 torical function of the discourse of civic liberties, which disguised the real nature of the Italian
 47 Republics: closed oligarchies riddled with civic strife and directed by imperialist ambitions. Follow-
 48 ing Pocock and Skinner, I view classical republicanism as an ideological system and a political
 vocabulary, but not necessarily a historical reality.

movements during the Restoration posited troubling questions about “the faults of the national mind which made liberty so fragile” (Romani 11).²

Romani claims that the post-1815 identity crisis involved France and Italy but not Britain, where the tradition of Whiggism continued to support an overwhelmingly positive national self-image of the English as the nation of the “noble and free,” capable of self-determination and resistance against any unjust political authority. However, the repressive measures adopted by Tory governments (the suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1794 and again in 1817, the Peterloo massacre, and the infamous Six Acts in 1819) led many to fear for the survival of free institutions. Writing in 1818, Shelley called this “an age of despair,” for public opinion, shocked by the atrocities of the Terror, was prepared to tolerate a renegotiation of constitutional liberties. But if panic is to give way to reason, Shelley contends, it will become clear that the Revolution did not fail because mankind is unfit for freedom, but because the French, having long been under the yoke of absolutism, could not handle civic liberties with the “wisdom and tranquillity of freemen” (*Poetical Works* 37).³ To an even greater degree than revolutionary France, Italy embodied the problem of a mismatch between government and collective disposition. Although a statement attributed to writer and statesman Massimo d’Azeglio—“now that Italy is made, we must make the Italians”—is commonly interpreted as a call to overcome regional particularism, in reality it addressed another issue: that Italians had yet to be equipped with the civic spirit necessary to support social and political life in the new state (Patriarca 51–52). Even before unification, the relationship between political status quo and Italian temperament was a contentious matter. In Staël’s *Corinne*, the Scottish Lord Nelvil makes no concessions to the nationless Italians: “Je suis sévère pour les nations . . . je crois toujours qu’elles méritent leur sort, quel qu’il soit” (“I judge nations severely . . . I always think they deserve their lot, whatever it may be”). The Anglo-Italian Corinne replies: “Cela est dur . . . Peut-être en vivant en Italie éprouverez-vous un sentiment d’attendrissement sur ce beau pays, que la nature semble avoir paré comme une victime” (96–97; “This is hard . . . Though living in Italy, perhaps you will come to feel an affection for this beautiful land which nature seems to have adorned like a victim,” Raphael 54). For Corinne, the mismatch between the beauty of the country and its corrupted institutions calls for political reform. Aspiring to a revolution and engineering political change necessarily involve a reformulation of a character-government nexus that would account not only for uniformity but also for anachronism and uneven development.

Germaine de Staël is recognized as one of the most distinctive voices in the debate over national character, to which she contributed as both a political theorist and novelist, examining the effects of character on the collective as well as the individual sphere. Manfred Beller identifies in her work the “turning point from the humanist and Enlightenment idea of national characters to politically inspired

² Climatology did not disappear after 1789 (see Dainotto 52–86). It resurfaces in Staël’s distinction between northern and southern peoples, also adopted by Leopardi (see Moe 31–36). But as Moe also notes, Leopardi, like Staël, has a “historical view of the problem” and places the traditional north-south polarity in the context of the transfer of economic and political power to northern Europe in the modern period (34); see also Negri 145.

³ Staël argues along very similar lines in *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution* (1798); and Leopardi remarks on the limit posed to the revolution by the “depravazione interna de’ costumi” (internal corruption of mores) in France (*Zibaldone* 608–09, 4 April 1821).

Nationalism,” as well as the moment when “the image of other countries and peoples has become an important argument, not only in political discussions between nations, but also in poetical representations” (3). If *Corinne ou l’Italie* is a novel as much about the relationship between two temperamentally different individuals as differences of a collective nature, Staël’s narrative is nevertheless underpinned by her understanding of nations as founded on social affections and passions, which governments should manage correctly to ensure the wellbeing of citizens (see *De l’influence*; see also Guerlac). It is on the connection between this concept of national character and the historical-archaeological tour of Italy that Corinne and Oswald undertake that I would like to concentrate.

Corinne and Oswald (nominally a Scotsman) personify the national traits of Italy and Britain respectively (see Balaye 16–17). Their divergent attitudes to society, art, religion, and life in general fuel their attraction for one another but ultimately prove incompatible, leading to a tragic conclusion. “These values are no longer abstract components of national character, but deeply embedded elements of personal psychology,” writes Nanette Le Coat, “but psychology in turn is shaped by national history and character” (142). Discussions about the merits and flaws of the Italian character abound in the novel, whose guiding principle is to familiarize and explain otherness through comparison. In Book 2, Corinne ascends the Capitol to be crowned poet laureate. Her friend Prince Castel-Forte introduces her to the cheering audience with a speech that showcases her role as a living allegory of Italy:

Nous disons aux étrangers : “Regardez-la, c’est l’image de notre belle Italie; elle est ce que nous serions sans l’ignorance, l’envie, la discorde et l’indolence auxquelles notre sort nous a condamnés; nous nous plaisons à la contempler comme une admirable production de notre climat, de nos beaux arts, comme un rejeton du passé, comme une prophétie de l’avenir.” (57)

We say to foreigners: “Look at her, she is the image of our beautiful Italy; she is what we would be but for the ignorance, the envy, the discord, and the indolence to which our fate has condemned us. We delight in gazing at her as an admirable product of our climate and our arts, as an offshoot of the past, as a harbinger of the future.” (Raphael 27)

The speech clearly is directed not to fellow Italians but to a critical Northern European audience (represented by Oswald, who is standing in the crowd), whose unfair judgments Castel-Forte seeks to correct. Indeed Staël’s comparative impetus is particularly well suited to Italy, where national identity was shaped by the confrontation with, and assimilation of, representations of Italians made by influential Others, especially British and French. As Silvana Patriarca has recently argued, “Italy was discursively constructed as a nation in a Europe-wide conversation of the theme of national ‘vices’ and ‘virtues’ and among partners that were unequal in terms of power and self-perceptions” (24). From the outset, the discourse of Italianness is dialogic, comparative, and founded on a practice of geographical and diachronical othering. Thus, although *Corinne* is primarily a “roman sur l’Italie,” as Staël called it in her correspondence, its representations of Italianness foreground the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange and mutual understanding between European nations—a process that Staël believed literature, and especially literary translations, had the duty to facilitate.⁴

⁴ See her letter to Friedrich Schlegel, 4 November 1805 (Jasinski 691). Staël presents her views on translations in *De l’esprit des traductions*, which appeared in the journal *Biblioteca italiana* in 1816 and generated a heated debate to which Leopardi contributed an (unpublished) response.

But the most notable feature of Staël's discourse of Italianness is its historical perspective. In the passage above, Castel-Forte uses Corinne as an illustration of the good qualities of Italy that outsiders fail to recognize: look at her, he says, and you will understand "notre belle Italie." The equivalence, however, is imperfect: Corinne represents an Italy freed from "l'ignorance, l'envie, la discorde et l'indolence," not Italy as it actually is. The initial discrepancy between foreign perceptions and the real Italy is followed and explained by another: Italy as it is and as it could be. Images of Italy present and future, real and imagined, are superimposed on one another as foreigners are invited to look beyond the country's apparent decay and imagine the realization of its full potential in the future. It is significant that Staël does not mention here the often invoked "martyrdom" of Italy at the hands of the great European powers. Instead, she claims that what prevents Italy from rising again is its own vices. Staël uses the discourse of character to argue that there is a base, corrupt side to Italy that has to be brought under control for the best and most authentically Italian qualities of the nation to emerge. Corinne is the prophecy of a future Italy, with its faults removed and its talents magnified. Yet she is also "un rejeton du passé" and everything about her—her physical appearance, her house, the style of her improvisations (see Esterhammer)—invites associations with classical antiquity. The same idea returns in Corinne's first conversation with Oswald. Again the tone is defensive, at once resentful of foreigners and seeking their approbation:

Un peu d'indulgence nous suffit de la part des étrangers; et comme il nous est refusé depuis longtemps d'être une nation, nous avons le grand tort de manquer souvent, comme individus, de la dignité qui ne nous est pas permise comme peuple; mais quand vous connaîtrez les italiens, vous verrez qu'ils ont dans leur caractère quelques traces de la grandeur antique, quelques traces rares, effacées, mais qui pourraient reparaître dans des temps plus heureux. (74)

All we ask of foreigners is a little indulgence, and as, for a long time, we have been denied the lot of being a nation, we are often greatly at fault, as individuals, in lacking the dignity which is not permitted to us as a people. But when you know the Italians, you will see that in their character they have a few traces of ancient greatness, a few scanty, half-obliterated traces which might, however, reappear in happier times. (Raphael 38)

Corinne appeals to foreign visitors who witness the moral degradation of Italians to consider that these vices are not native to the Italian character, but are the consequence of centuries-long subjugation and exploitation. Even her intensely stereotyped description of the Neapolitan *lazzaroni*, for much of nineteenth-century literature the most spectacularly uncivilized among the Italians (see Calaresu and Hills), makes some allowances for their faults. No doubt, Staël takes "la paresse et l'ignorance" ("laziness and ignorance") to be consequences of the Southern climate (see Moe and Dainotto). However, she also notes that "ce peuple n'est pas plus méchant qu'un autre . . . on le conduirait au bien, si ses institutions politiques et religieuses étaient bonnes" (290–91; "The people here are no more vicious than others . . . they could be led to goodness if their political and religious institutions were good," Raphael 192). In other words, good politics and a solid civil society can tilt the balance of character and temper the heat-induced "Italian passions." The theory underpinning such statements is that of the "historicité des mœurs," which Staël expounded in her political writings and which holds that character, of individuals as well as of nations, is not immutable but changes over time in response to external circumstances (see Romani 63–92). In particular, a relation was assumed to exist between the form of government and the temperament of

citizens, whereby despotism fostered vice and liberty exalted the individual, although public virtue was itself necessary to establish and maintain free governments. The claim made by Corinne that “les gouvernements font le caractère des nations” (160; “governments make the character of nations,” Raphael 99) became a staple argument used in defense of Italians, because it imputed their degeneracy to a temporary state of affairs and not to a congenital, incurable propensity.⁵ Not only did this argument help shift the blame away from Italians themselves, but it also opened the possibility of moral regeneration through political reform.

Yet what Corinne demands is an almost impossible task: to see what is not there, to judge Italians not for what they are but for what they were and might again—one day, soon, or perhaps never—become. The novel’s last chapters describe Corinne’s descent into despair and death after Oswald chooses to return to Britain and marry a proper English lady. And, as in the example above, Oswald’s unsentimental commentary sharply counterpoints Corinne’s pronouncements about the resurgence of Italy. Whether the novel as a whole expresses a pessimistic view of Italy is, finally, unclear. This ambiguity derives from the fact that, for Staël, identity is fluid and composite, subject to an uneven process of transformation that wears away some parts of the self while adding to others. The character of contemporary Italians is the result of the workings of history on the human spirit, and, like Italian cities, it is a conglomerate of old and new, in which inferior modern additions often hide the beauty of ancient remains. In the passage cited above, Corinne calls Oswald’s attention to “quelques traces de la grandeur antique” surviving in modern Italians. Likewise, visitors to Rome should not be put off by scenes of poverty and degradation, because as you walk around Rome, Staël writes, it might just happen that

Tout à coup une colonne brisée, un bas-relief à demi détruit, des pierres liées à la façon indestructible des architectes anciens, vous rappellent qu’il y a dans l’homme une puissance éternelle, une étincelle divine, et qu’il ne faut pas se lasser de l’exciter en soi-même et de la ranimer dans les autres. (111)

Suddenly a broken column, a half-destroyed bas-relief, stones linked together in the indestructible manner of the ancient architects, remind you that there is in man an eternal power, a divine spark, and that you must never weary of kindling it in yourself and of reviving it in others. (Raphael 65)

Both Italian soil and Italian souls carry within them half-erased traces of an extraordinary era of human history, whose relevance transcends the boundaries of this as yet unborn nation and embraces the whole of humankind. Observing the Italian character is thus as instructive as studying a fossil or an archaeological find: even if it is damaged almost to the point of unintelligibility, it provides invaluable clues about the past from which all of us came.

Even more than Rome, Pompeii is the site where the new historical sensibility, based on a unmediated emotional connection and identification with the past, finds a perfect testing ground. Corinne and Oswald visit what Staël calls “antiquity’s most peculiar ruin” as part of their tour of Italy, just at the point when their relationship is beginning to show signs of strain. Unlike the spectacular monuments of Rome, which memorialize eminent political figures and events, Pompeii, whose historical importance would be negligible if not for the eruption, bears

⁵ This view was put forward by Sismondi, a member of Staël’s circle, in his influential *Histoire des Républiques Italiennes du Moyen Âge* (1807–18). Among Risorgimento thinkers, it was championed by Cesare Balbo and Giuseppe Mazzini (see Patriarca 36–45).

witness to “la vie privée des anciens” (“the private lives of the people of ancient times”). Domestic tools, remnants of wine and food, streets and buildings are preserved “d’une manière effrayante” (“in a frightening way”) and, walking around the open porticoes and public spaces of the ancient city, one feels what it must have been like to be part of a political and social order that “excitaient les facultés, développaient l’âme, et donnaient à l’homme pour but le perfectionnement de lui-même et de ses semblables” (302; “stimulated the faculties, developed the soul, and gave man the aim of perfecting himself and his fellow men,” Raphael 198). In his study of archaeological metaphors in Romantic historicism, Göran Blix argues that the excavations at Pompeii mark a shift in Western culture from an aesthetically oriented study of antiquity to an “archaeological gaze” that examines the vestiges of the past, including trivial objects, to reconstruct the history of a civilization as a whole (21; cf. Chandler 147–51). A new type of historical narrative emerges, which not only chronicles individual occurrences but also aims at reconstructing the overall system of beliefs or, as Staël puts it, “le caractère et les mœurs d’une nation” (302; “the character and customs of a nation,” Raphael 200) at a particular point in time—a reconstruction that starts from the material traces of the past. Yet such traces also brought with them two different experiences of time—duration vs. erasure, presence vs. absence—that suggested disquieting questions as to how much of the past is still alive and how much of the present will live on in the future.⁶ As is well known, the revival of Italy’s glorious past is one of the key tenets of Risorgimento ideology, which called for a moral reawakening of Italians and their re-education as free citizens such as they had been in Roman and medieval times, and which, as Carolyn Springer has shown, created a new, politically charged archaeological imagery. Staël’s hermeneutics of the Italian ruins, both moral and architectonic, is based on a sensuous experience of place and on the activation of an imaginative type of memory, or what Corinne calls “les souvenirs de l’imagination,” in contrast to “les souvenirs de l’esprit” or intellectual memories (111). Corinne’s poetic reassembly aligns with what Springer has called “the principle of *synecdochic assimilation*—the reintegration of the whole into a unified object”—that characterizes indigenous approaches to archaeology (3). According to Springer, Italians of all political creeds were bent on celebrating ruins as survival rather than decay so as to mobilize them for either conservative or revolutionary purposes. European Romanticism, by contrast, is “elegiac” (Springer’s model is Byron) and reads Italian monuments metonymically, as signs of an absence. But Staël’s semiotics of ruins does not fit neatly into this binary, nor, as I demonstrate below, does Shelley’s.

“Lines written among the Euganean Hills” is not among Shelley’s most canonical works, yet, as Alan Weinberg notes, “many attitudes expressed in the poem re-emerge in his later work and can be reliably taken as the measure of his Italian experience” (24). Here, as in *Corinne*, reflections about history, place, and human existence are presented “sub specie Italiae.” From the vantage point of a “solitary

⁶ Lokke describes Staël’s notion of historical knowledge as “resuscitation of the dead” and “contact with a spirit world” (503). At the same time, nineteenth-century visions of London and Paris as future ruins are also common: see Zimmerman 79–141, Blix 155–98, and Chandler 110–20.

hill,” the poem’s speaker observes the sun’s path and the changing effects of light on the landscape below, which encompasses the Po valley from the Alps to the Appennines and the cities of Venice and Padua. Sunlight illuminates a world whose present is markedly different from its past, since both cities had lost their cultural primacy and independence after the Congress of Vienna assigned Lombardy and Venetia to the Austrian Empire. The spatio-temporal situatedness of the poem’s central sequence, however, is framed by visions that transcend historical experience: “the deep wide sea of Misery” (2–3) in the first two verse paragraphs and the “calm and blooming cove” (342) at the poem’s end, a “healing paradise” (355) that affords a better refuge from the storm of life than a transient, decaying Italy.

As John Jay Baker has observed, the formal inconsistencies of “Euganean Hills” are precisely what makes the poem “uniquely instructive” among Shelley’s works (170). They lay bare the unresolved conflict between Shelley’s “adherence to a metaphysical concept of time” and “the attention turned outward to a landscape whose historical specificity (hence, otherness) defies any easy appropriation of it to sheerly subjective ends” (161). Although several critics have illuminated the poem’s engagement with historical change and its relationship to Italy’s literary tradition (see Baker, Kroeber, Randel, Reiman, and Weinberg), the way in which both issues are connected to the problem of the Italian character has been overlooked. Shelley’s philosophy of history has been described as “torn between idealism and skepticism”—the same opposition that a long-standing critical tradition has associated with his moral, epistemological, and aesthetic thought (see Roberts 127–223). Jonathan Sachs has also argued that this tension increased after Waterloo, when Shelley’s philhellenism gave way to a newly conceived interest in Rome, whose derivative culture and corrupt institutions seemed especially attuned to the reality of contemporary Europe. “The contrast between the two ancient civilizations,” writes Sachs, “partakes in a broader tension between a supernatural ideal and a more earth-bound attention to the past that runs throughout Shelley’s poetry” (174). Extending this line of inquiry, I suggest that Italian history also furnished Shelley with an example of how liberty and moral greatness can give way to tyranny and vice, while also adumbrating the possibility that they can be restored in the future. This new insight into “the chaos of history,” to use Hugh Robert’s phrase, is at odds with the continuing metaphysical momentum of Shelley’s poetry. My contention here is that the emergence of a split temporal consciousness has to do with the specific site where Shelley experiences a convergence of timelessness and historicity, familiarity and otherness: Italy and, in particular, the Italian character.

Like most travellers, Shelley came to Italy with pre-formed expectations that the country fulfilled only in part. He wrote to Leigh Hunt of his divided feelings towards the place in an oft-cited letter whose implications for my reading of “Euganean Hills” justify quoting it again here:

There are *two* Italies—one composed of the green earth and transparent sea, and the mighty ruins of ancient time, and ærial mountains, and the warm and radiant atmosphere which is interfused through all things. The other consists of the Italians of the present day, their works and ways. The one is the most sublime and lovely contemplation that can be conceived by the imagination of man; the other is the most degraded, disgusting, and odious. (Jones 67)

Annoyance with modern Italians, guilty of disturbing the contemplation of the “real” Italy one has come to see, is often recorded in Romantic travelogues (Luzzi 53–76). But there is more to Shelley’s dichotomy than anti-Italian prejudice: the

contrast between a pure and a corrupted Italy is articulated not only in moral terms but also in relation to time. Enduring features (benign nature, magnificent ruins) are set against others (the Italians' "works and ways"), that are flawed and time-bound. The same contrast is operative in "Euganean Hills." In the central part of the poem, the speaker watches with relief the sun rise "mid the mountains Euganean," believing he has landed on one of the "many flowering islands" after a miserable journey "in the waters of wide Agony" (66–67). Here, Italy still represents a positive, life-affirming permanence through transformation capable of keeping blind necessity and mortality (symbolized by the sea) at bay. After the sunrise scene, however, the tone suddenly changes to register a sinister vision of decay. The striking images of the sunrise scene, in which Venice appears as shining "column, tower, and dome, and spire" (106), are followed by an analysis of the historical process whereby "a darker day" (117) has arrived:

Those who alone thy towers behold
Quivering through aëreal gold,
As I now behold them here,
Would imagine not they were
Sepulchres, where human forms,
Like pollution-nourished worms,
To the corpse of greatness cling,
Murdered, and now mouldering. (142–49)

From a distance the city appears unspoiled, but, upon moving closer, the poet discovers that Venice's imposing "towers" have become tombs, where the degenerate offspring of their creators live like parasites ("pollution-nourished worms") feeding on the dead body of this once great nation. In the moral degradation of its inhabitants, Shelley discovers another side to Italy, one that is not glorified but defaced by time. The realization that there are "two Italies" complicates the opposition between mortality and ever-blossoming life posited in the first three verse paragraphs (1–114), immersing the entire poem in a historical time, negatively inflected as decadence and loss. And it seems clear that what puts a stop to Shelley's idealization of Italy as a supra-historical entity is the Italian character.

For Shelley, as for Staël, the key to Italy's problems is bad government, which is in turn the product of the moral debasement of the citizens (their "sins and slaveries foul," 192). Under despotic Austrian rule, all aspects of political and intellectual life are stagnating: Venice's days as the main European sea power are long gone (213); in Padua's ancient university, the "lamp of learning . . . / now no more is burning" (256–57); and farmers suffer the Austrians' plunderings while "the sickle to the sword / lies unchanged" (225–26). But, even if the Italians were to take up arms, the vicious cycle of tyranny and anarchy, which Shelley saw unfolding in the events of the French Revolution, would repeat itself here:

Men must reap the things they sow,
Force from force must ever flow,
Or worse; but 'tis a bitter woe
That love or reason cannot change
The despot's rage, the slave's revenge. (231–35)

Violent upheavals fail to effect lasting change and result in tyranny under new forms; the character of the nation must be reformed and educated. "If Freedom should awake," writes Shelley, Venice and the other Italian cities "Might adorn this sunny land, / Twining memories of old time / With new virtues more sublime" (157–59). The process of decay can be reversed, because we are dealing, not with

organic degeneration within the framework of nature, but with historical processes that are influenced by human actions. The association invited at the beginning of the poem between the sun's course and the itinerary of Venice and Padua from splendor to darkness is set aside, seemingly to affirm that moral and political decay is not irreversible in the same sense that sunset inevitably follows dawn. The oscillation in "Euganean Hills" between linear and cyclical models of time might be explained by Kucich's suggestion that Shelley essentially strives to find "a way of conceptualizing eternity and time as perpetually interconnected contraries rather than the opposing endpoints of a linear continuum of history" (28). Read this way, Shelley's recipe for the regeneration of Italy, uniting a revival of tradition ("memories of old times") with its *Aufhebung* ("new virtues more sublime"), would be an attempt to reconcile genuine, open-ended change with the organicist logic of cyclical reproduction (cf. Randel).

As in *Corinne*, Italy's future depends on reactivating the remains of a nobler past. Shelley, however, is less optimistic than Staël about the resurgence of Italy: because it seems unlikely that modern Italians, so utterly devoid of civic virtues, would be able to carry through a revolution successfully, it would be better for Italy to "perish" lest its presence in a future free world "stain truth's rising day" (160–61). Shelley even seems to welcome the idea of a complete removal of Italy from the historical present and from the world map. If Italy really were to die, it could be preserved in its purest, unspoiled form, and the ideal would not have to be compared or mixed with an imperfect mundane reality. Shelley thus conceives of an elect community dedicated to the preservation and re-creation of the country through poetry that includes himself and Byron, whose sojourn in Venice has provided the city with "one remembrance, more sublime / Than the tattered pall of time" (171–72). The true Italy, in short, lives in the works of the (English) poets, who are the only rightful citizens of this ideal republic of the mind.⁷

Of Shelley's two Italies, one is everlasting, while the other has no rightful place in modernity. For both, any inclusion in the continuity of history is problematic. It should not be surprising, then, that the conclusion of "Euganean Hills" returns to scenes of natural beauty outside the framework of history: the sun has reached its zenith and radiates down on a serene landscape similar to that described in Shelley's letter to Leigh Hunt, a landscape enveloped in a "radiant atmosphere which is interfused through all things." Then, the light of the midday sun reaches into the poet's very soul and dispels the darkness within. The plains, the vines, the Alps—

And my spirit which so long
Darkened this swift stream of song,
Interpenetrated lie
By the glory of the sky:
Be it love, light, harmony,
Odour, or the soul of all
Which from heaven like dew doth fall,
Or the mind which feeds this verse
Peopling the lone universe. (311–19)

⁷ This is not just a cultural matter; it is political as well. Claims to the moral inheritance of Italy's Republican past are part of the traditional Whig interpretation of history (see Pocock). A reviewer of *Corinne* for the *Edinburgh Review* even observed that "an Englishman bears a much greater resemblance to a Roman, than an Italian of the present day" (qtd. in Romani 194).

For a moment, the multiplicity of natural forms and works of man, the flux of phenomenal change and even the impure subjectivity of the speaker's historical, contingent self ("my spirit which . . . / Darkened this swift stream of song"), are miraculously stilled and unified by a supernatural power that cannot be defined. In this context, the existence or non-existence of modern Italy and Italians is of no consequence. What is valuable is their re-creation in the poet's verses, where they can be freed from the shadows of imperfection and mortality.

This final transcendental turn seems to disavow the concrete experience of time and place that is at the heart of "Euganean Hills." Baker, for one, takes issue with what he calls the "illusory discourse of total interpenetration," which Shelley uses, unsuccessfully, to "falsify" the irreducible contrariety of history and utopia (159). In my view, however, Shelley does not forsake his engagement with history and the politics of character. In the last verse paragraph, the speaker imagines he has reached another island paradise, this time a genuine one, where he might live in perfect harmony with the ones he loves. Shelley announces that the "polluting multitude" encroaching on this private paradise will be subdued by the soothing sounds of nature, poetry,

And the love which heals all strife,
Circling, like the breath of life,
All things in that sweet abode
With its own mild brotherhood:
They, not it, would change; and soon
Every sprite beneath the moon
Would repent its envy vain
And the earth grow young again. (370–74)

It is easy to connect this final passage to Shelley's later statements about the civilizing function of poetry. In *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), he writes that poetic inspiration is "the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own," and claims that "the enthusiasm of virtue, love, patriotism and friendship is essentially linked with such emotions" (294). In fact, both the *Defence* and "Euganean Hills" make an argument for poetry's role in fostering social wellbeing and belonging through a reawakening of civic virtue. The discourse of character, with its train of disturbing, unsatisfying thoughts, even creeps into the ostensibly utopian world with which the poem concludes. (The "polluting multitude" echoes the earlier image of Italians as "pollution-nourished worms.") However, the corrupt masses can "repent" and "the earth grow young again." In a world where such miracles happen, Italians too can become a nation.

Commenting on Shelley's view of the human condition, Donald H. Reiman has suggested that, for the British poet, human beings are capable of great moral courage because, even "recognizing the possibility that they may be both ephemeral and helpless . . . they continue to imagine an ideal order and refuse to stop struggling to bring it into being for themselves and their posterity" ("Shelley" 13). The same words could be used to describe "La ginestra," Leopardi's great philosophical canzone, which sets forth an ideal of heroic skepticism and social improvement that resonates with Shelley's "Euganean Hills" even though there is no indication that Leopardi knew Shelley's works. However, he did engage intensely with

1 Staël's, and especially with her representation of Italy in *Corinne*.⁸ In his 1824 *Dis-*
 2 *corso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degl'italiani* (*Discourse on the Present State of the*
 3 *Customs of the Italians*), Leopardi comments on the recent Europe-wide surge of
 4 interest in Italy, "fatta oggetto di curiosità universale e di viaggi, molto più che ella
 5 non fu in altro tempo" (47; which has become the object of universal curiosity and
 6 travel, more than ever before), adding that, since the publication of *Corinne*, Italy
 7 is generally viewed in a more positive light, and even overrated, by foreign observ-
 8 ers (48).⁹ Leopardi agrees with Staël on "l'absence de société et d'opinion pub-
 9 lique" (163; "the absence of society and public opinion, 101) in Italy, as well as the
 10 irrelevance of notions of honor and *amour-propre* to the Italians. But far from deliv-
 11 ering them back to Rousseau's state of pre-social, natural happiness, as Staël
 12 claims, this leaves Italians helpless before the collapse of all metaphysical founda-
 13 tions to human life (what Leopardi calls "illusioni") brought about by Enlighten-
 14 ment rationalism. From this arises "la indifferenza profonda, radicata ed efficacis-
 15 sima verso se stessi e verso gli altri, che è la peggior peste de' costumi, de' caratteri,
 16 e della morale" (65; that profound, rooted, powerful indifference towards oneself
 17 and others, which is the worst plague of customs, characters, and morals). In other
 18 words, the absence of socially constructed values and a discipline internalized
 19 through social exchange makes Italians entirely selfish and amoral.

20 Twelve years later, in the great philosophical canzone "La ginestra," Leopardi
 21 returns to discuss the structure of social life and the impact of eighteenth-century
 22 materialism on morality, but, as we shall see, he formulates the problem in a radi-
 23 cally new way. Here, as in *Corinne* and "Euganean Hills," the Italian landscape itself
 24 is an illustration of human impermanence and change. Leopardi's focus is one of
 25 the most emblematic sites of nineteenth-century historical thinking, one which was
 26 also the setting for one the crucial scenes in *Corinne* discussed above: "l'arida schi-
 27 ena / del formidabil monte / sterminator Vesevo (1–3; the arid flank / Of the ter-
 28 rifying mountain / Vesuvius the destroyer). Leopardi's portrayal of Vesuvius does
 29 indeed match the spectacle witnessed by Corinne and Oswald, together with its
 30 suggestion of mankind's vulnerability to the power of nature. Confronted with this
 31 infernal landscape, Staël's characters were left to wonder "si la bonté seule présidait
 32 aux phénomènes de la création" (338; "whether benevolence alone presided over
 33 the phenomena of creation," 226). Leopardi, instead, answers the question in the
 34 negative. Shrubs of broom grow on the hillside of the volcano, and the poet remem-
 35 bers seeing the same plant in the "erme contrade" (8; lonely parts) around Rome,
 36 whose melancholy aspect reminds the traveler of the city's "perduto impero" (11;
 37 lost empire). Immediately, a connection is made between the instant annihilation
 38 of Pompeii and Rome's long decline, with both occasioned by the overwhelming
 39 power of nature. As with Shelley's Venice, we are made aware of Rome and Pompeii
 40 less as places than as historical phenomena subject to an inexorable process of
 41 transformation and decay. Decay, however, loses some of the moral undertone it
 42 had in "Euganean Hills," as Leopardi shifts responsibility from humankind to a
 43

44 ⁸ Jones documents Shelley's reception in Italy, including an early comparison with Leopardi made by
 45 critic Giacomo Zanella in 1883 (147–48). In the Introduction to his edition of the *Discorso*, Rigoni notes
 46 that "a whole set of themes and motifs developed in the *Discorso* . . . derive from *Corinne*" (8).

47 ⁹ All translations from the Italian are mine except for quotes from Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, which I
 48 have taken from the new English version edited by Michael Caesar and Franco d'Intino.

nature that is a “dura nutrice” (44; cruel nurse) or, more simply, “dell’uomo ignara” (289; unaware of man). Leopardi’s target here is not so much the degeneration as the overconfidence of the moderns, who believe in their “*magnifiche sorti e progressive*” (51; *magnificent and progressive destiny*). Nor do the ruins of Pompeii evoke, as they did in *Corinne*, the thrilling vision of a past civilization resurrected. Leopardi’s wanderer stands in the forum among rows of broken columns, and his gaze is drawn to “il bipartito giogo / e la cresta fumante, / che alla sparsa ruina ancor minaccia (277–79; The split ridge / And the smoking crest / Still menacing the scattered ruin). In these lines we find nothing of the Romantic aesthetic of the trace, associated by Foucault with the epistemological certainty that “time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity” (13). The pleasure of reconnecting with a distant age of human history is overshadowed by the continuing threat (“ancor minaccia”) that nature poses to human life and achievements. In this sense, archaeology has discovered what folk memory has always preserved: just like the visitor to the excavations,

il villanello intento
ai vigneti, che a stento in questi campi
nutre la morta zolla e incenerita
ancor leva lo sguardo
sospettoso alla vetta
fatal . . . (240–45)

The farmer bending
On the vines, which the lifeless and charred turf
Hardly nourishes
Still lifts his anxious eyes
To the fatal peak.

The changes wrought by succeeding generations and eras of human history are inconsequential from the perspective of nature’s “lungo cammino” (293; long path), whose measure is deep geological time (cf. Moe).

The theme of the eruption and its consequences (stanzas 1, 5–7) is broken up by a scene of a different tenor, which recognizes nature’s immense scale in the superhuman serenity of the night sky. Sitting alone by the seashore, the speaker imagines seeing the earth from the perspective of the most remote celestial bodies. To these faraway worlds

non l’uomo
e non la terra sol, ma tutte in uno,
del numero infinite e della mole,
con l’aureo sole insieme, le nostre stelle
o sono ignote, o così paion come
essi alla terra, un punto
di luce nebulosa. (177–83)

not only man
And earth but all together
Our stars, infinite in size and number,
The golden sun among them,
Are unfamiliar or else they appear
The way these look from the earth: a point
Of nebulous light.

Seen from a cosmic distance, the solar system must appear as small and inconspicuous as the most far-off planets seem when viewed from the earth. Here, the

self-othering that defines Italian discourses of identity expands into a comparison and confrontation not merely between nations but between worlds—a “cosmopolitics,” as Guido Guglielmi called it (163). Thus relativized and minimized, modern man, Italian or other, is exposed to the full force of Leopardi’s attack. The second and third stanzas contain a ferocious invective against the “secol superbo e sciocco” (53; proud and foolish century) that, with its obscurantist ideology, turned its back “al lume” (81; to the light) of Enlightenment materialism. Leopardi’s target is the political cant of the day, in particular the optimism of the Italian patriotic circles, dominated by moderate liberals and constitutional reformers (see Panicara 1–15). “Regeneration” had become the byword in the central years of the Risorgimento, when ideas of Italian national genius and cultural supremacy were mobilized as a reaction to negative stereotyping and as a way to bolster confidence in the capacity of Italians to regain the level of civilization they had achieved in ancient times (Patriarca 20–50). In his earlier *Canzoni* (“All’Italia,” for instance) Leopardi himself had spoken about Italy’s superiority over other nations. But in “La ginestra” all of this is dismissed as self-flattery and “pargoleggiar” (59; childish blabbering). For if, indeed, “l’uomo è nulla” (173; man is nothing), what significance can Italian claims to nationhood have?

However, at the end of the third stanza a new element is introduced that, as Bruno Biral has noted, “forces its way into Leopardi’s system of thought, breaking the chain of nature-unhappiness-wickedness” (164). When the pure mechanism of nature will finally be revealed “al volgo” (146; to the people),

e quell’orror che primo
 contra l’empia natura
 strinse i mortali in social catena,
 fia ricondotto in parte
 da verace saper; l’onesto e il retto
 conversar cittadino,
 e giustizia e pietade
 altra radice avranno allor
 che non superbe fole. (147–54)

And the fear that first
 Joined mortals in a common bond
 Against unholy nature,
 Shall be revived in part
 Through real understanding; then an honest and just
 Society of citizens,
 And justice and piety
 Will take root from something more
 Than vain mythologies.

Finding that no help is forthcoming from above, human beings will realize they can only draw on their own resources, join forces, and abandon internecine strife. Thus conceived, the social pact will be based on rational principles of utility and personal gain, and civic morality will have stronger foundations than the “superbe fole” of religion and transcendentalism. Leopardi assigns to reason the community-building task that previously belonged to myth, and the contents of this new aetiology are the civic humanist virtues—honesty, justice, and compassion (“pietade”)—that Staël and Shelley also placed at the core of their imagined communities. Crucially, although Leopardi sees these values as historical (they are lost and acquired according to circumstances), he bypasses politics in the strict sense,

aiming instead for an epistemological revolution that would bring back the ancient republican virtues under a new guise.¹⁰ As Paul Hamilton notes, Leopardi's reinvention of the Italian citizen describes "a new franchise, a new constituency" that, because it outstrips all available political options, "becomes a metaphysical discovery applicable to us all" (210).¹¹ Leopardi reactivates the classical patrimony of public virtues in light of the modern disillusionment about the human condition, elevating even day-to-day existence in a demystified world to heroic status.

In "La ginestra," in fact, it is neither climate nor government that shapes the disposition of Leopardi's future citizens, but a better understanding of nature and human history. In the *Discorso*, Leopardi had claimed that the decentering of man caused the dissolution of moral and societal norms in Italy; here, that claim is reversed and "il vero / dell'aspra sorte e del depresso loco / che natura ci diè" (78–80; the truth / about the bitter fate and the miserable condition / that nature gave us) becomes the fountainhead of a reformed community bound together by "vero amore" (132; true love). This has nothing to do with Christian love, in the sense that it does not ask human nature to transcend its own limits. For the same reason, it is entirely different from "la fola dell'amore universale" ("the fairy tale of universal love," *Zibaldone* 890) propagated by Enlightenment philanthropy. It is "vero" because it is rationally and humanely achievable through the alignment of the individual good, towards which we naturally strive, with the common good. Thus, self-love (*amor proprio*) can translate into solidarity, and even self-sacrifice, when its object coincides with collective or national wellbeing. But for "amor proprio" to become "amor patrio" (love of country), a particular system of government must be put in place. In an 1821 entry in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi had already argued that "la virtù, l'eroismo, la grandezza d'animo non può trovarsi . . . se non che in uno stato popolare, o dove la nazione è partecipe del potere" ("virtue, heroism, greatness of spirit cannot be found . . . except in a popular state, or where the nation has a share of power," 1563). In effect, then, Leopardi conceives of the link between democratic government and public morality in terms similar to Staël and Shelley; however, his views on human nature are more uncompromisingly anti-utopian and foreground the need for a rational management of the passions, including the egoism that inevitably directs human behavior. Leopardi's "vero amore" thus can be assimilated not to Christian *caritas* but to the *caritas* and *pietas* of Roman times—that is, the respect and affection that citizens owe to their *patria*, which moves them to behave justly and generously not only towards their immediate family but towards all fellow-citizens.¹²

¹⁰ Leopardi's anti-essentialism emerges in various entries of the *Zibaldone* on gender (2260–64, 20 December 1821), language (2694–700, 17 May 1823), differences between individuals (2862–4, 30 June 1823), and nations (3197–206, 19 August 1823).

¹¹ Paul Hamilton graciously let me read the chapter "Leopardi and the Proper Converse of the Citizen" before it was published in *Realpolitik*. Like Hamilton's, my interpretation of Leopardi's politics attempts to move beyond the long-standing dispute between the proponents of a progressive, rationalist Leopardi (Binni and Luporini) and those who see him as an anti-dialectic, profoundly skeptical thinker who had little interest in the political problems at hand (Guglielmi, Rigoni, and, in some measure, Toni Negri). In my view, Leopardi's theory of nationhood, while going far beyond the horizon of expectation of Risorgimento liberals, also draws upon values—citizenship, liberty, and solidarity—associated with classical republicanism.

¹² On Leopardi's idealization of ancient republicanism, filtered through Enlightenment anthropology and Jacobinism, see, among others, Timpanaro 10–21.

1 “La ginestra” illustrates that any type of human or national exceptionalism is
 2 an inadequate nation-building strategy and a weak foundation for virtuous, free
 3 societies. Needless to say, however, the language and practice of modern national-
 4 ism did not develop according to Leopardi’s aspirations. Maurizio Viroli has done
 5 much to disentangle the ideals of patriotism and the conception of society associ-
 6 ated with it from the discourse of modern nationalism, which, as he writes, “came
 7 about as a transformation or adaptation of the language of patriotism” in the late
 8 eighteenth century (8). Viroli defines patriotism as “love of country understood
 9 not as attachment to the cultural, ethnic, and religious unity of a people, but as
 10 love of common liberty and the institutions that sustain it” (12). I have sketched
 11 above the process by which an encounter between the tradition of civic humanism
 12 and the discourse of national character in the early nineteenth century resulted in
 13 a new complex of ideas about the dispositions of a people, the organization of
 14 public life, and the way these two factors interact in time. With their historicized
 15 and politicized portraits of national character, Staël, Shelley, and Leopardi were
 16 poised between the old idiom of republican patriotism and the modern idea of
 17 the nation. On the one hand, Leopardi’s belief in the contractual and utilitarian
 18 nature of society, together with his appeal to a universal “umana compagna”
 19 (“company of mankind,” 129), look back to the cosmopolitan civic philosophy of
 20 the Enlightenment. On the other hand, his rejection of generic philanthropy and
 21 the way he presents nature as an external enemy against which human beings
 22 should make common cause are redolent of nationalism’s antagonizing of the
 23 Other. Similarly, in both Staël’s and Shelley’s conceptualizations of character lib-
 24 erty and culture as universal (or at least pan-European) principles survive side by
 25 side with moments when national identity is called upon to prevail over or exclude
 26 others (the expulsion of Corinne from Oswald’s life in Britain or the claims to
 27 English intellectual ownership of Italy advanced in “Euganean Hills”). Further-
 28 more, if the version of national identity found in Staël, Shelley, and Leopardi is
 29 distant from the Enlightenment model of universal citizenship and abstract rights,
 30 it also does not correspond to the ethnic-cultural nationalism that will emerge
 31 later in the nineteenth century. Indeed, although it shares with nationalism an
 32 emphasis on customs, culture, language, and other features that make a nation
 33 united and distinct from all others, it also asserts that these features change in
 34 response to political and historical events.

35 Indeed, the discourse of national character in *Corinne*, “Euganean Hills,” and
 36 “La ginestra” has more far-reaching implications than any piece of nationalist rhet-
 37 oric or anecdotal stereotyping, and, as such, it becomes the lens through which
 38 different hypotheses about the existence of human societies and individuals in
 39 time are analyzed. As I hope to have shown in this essay, post-revolutionary Italy
 40 worked as a paradigm for a new kind of national typing, which shifted national
 41 character away from the sphere of nature and climate into that of history and poli-
 42 tics. That Italy should be the locus of this conceptual shift was no accident. The
 43 human and natural landscape of Italy is a palimpsest of cultural practice in succes-
 44 sive eras of history that provided all three writers with insights, not only into the
 45 workings of time and the limits of human agency, which are hardly new ideas, but
 46 also more specifically into the social and political embeddedness of collective iden-
 47 tity. From this it followed that attempts to “reform” or “regenerate” national char-
 48

acter must accompany or even precede any program of political reform like that proposed by supporters of the Risorgimento in Italy and abroad. In the sphere of early nineteenth-century philosophical and literary discourse, a simultaneously decaying, resilient, and potentially regenerated Italian character offered new avenues of research into the non-linear relations that exist between past, present, and the multiplicity of possible futures. The questions posed by these texts about Italians—What kind of people are they? Why do they behave the way they do?—suggest that personal and collective identity are relative and historically determined. In the process, Italianness became the paradoxical figuration of both the worst flaws of human nature and the endless striving to overcome them.

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